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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of teachers and parents of students with learning disabilities working together to ensure that students' educational programs are appropriate and address their specific needs. It provides guidelines aimed at fostering positive teacher-parent relationships by discussing recent legislative mandates and current policy issues. It also addresses methods of positive and constructive communication and issues related to interaction between parents and teachers which should promote successful home-school partnerships. Recommended teacher strategies include: (1) explaining the class goals and objectives at the first meeting and inviting parents to share any relevant information that would help the teacher to understand the child; (2) preparing for teacher parent conferences and finding a mutually convenient time; (3) providing enough time to devote to the conference and providing a comfortable meeting room; (4) arranging seating so that all parties are perceived to be equal; (5) using clear terminology; (6) setting an agenda that is structured but still flexible; (7) encouraging parents to discuss any problems they or their children are experiencing; (8) ensuring that all parties know their rights; (9) being cognizant of cultural differences; and (10) involving students in the planning process as much as possible. (Contains 47 references.) (CR)

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Improving Communication Between Parents and Teachers:

Promoting Effective Intervention for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Family involvement in the school should be proactive, rather than reactive. It is critical to insure that parents and teachers of students with learning disabilities recognize their rights and legal obligations, understand pupils from both the home and school perspective and work together to ensure that students' educational programs are appropriate to meet their needs. The education of the child needs to be seen as a joint venture, a collegial relationship needs to be fostered between parents and teachers. This article provides guidelines aimed at fostering positive teacher-parent relationships by discussing recent legislative mandates and current policy issues promoted by professional education organizations. It also addresses methods of positive and constructive communication and issues related to interaction between parents and teachers which should promote successful home-school partnerships. After all, united we stand - divided we fail.

Improving Communication Between Parents and Teachers: Promoting Effective Intervention for Student with Disabilities

Parent-teacher partnerships are important for all students from pre-school through high school but a cohesive home-school relationship is especially critical for students with disabilities. Pupils with learning and behavioral disorders require ongoing structure, support and reinforcement which can be most effective when communication between home and school is productive and ongoing. It is critical that parents and teachers recognize their rights and legal obligations, understand pupils from both the home and school perspective and work together to ensure that students' educational programs are appropriate and address their specific needs. The education of the child needs to be seen as a joint venture; a collegial relationship needs to be fostered between parents and teachers (Jordan, Reyes-Blanes, Peel, Peel, & Lane, 1998). Educators are recognizing that a collaborative, rather than an adversarial, relationship between school and home will ultimately benefit students (Sussell, Carr, and Hartman, 1996). This article provides guidelines aimed at fostering positive teacher-parent relationships. It reviews recent legislative mandates and current policy issues promoted by professional education organizations. It also addresses methods of positive and constructive communication and issues related to interaction between parents and teachers which should promote successful home-school partnerships.

Parent involvement in the schooling of the child or adolescent with any type of special education need is not only pedagogically sound but legislatively mandated. Over

thirty years of research and reports by practitioners have indicated a direct correlation between parental involvement and children's school success, specifically, in the areas of enhanced self-esteem, improved behavior, better school attendance, student motivation and academic achievement. Despite this strong evidence, few schools in this country meaningfully involve families in their programs or activities (Mapp, 1997). With the implementation of new legislation and increased emphasis by professional organizations on promoting parent-teacher partnerships, we should begin to witness an increased home-school connection.

Legislative Mandates

There are significant efforts at the federal, state and local government levels to increase home-school communication and active involvement of parents in their child's educational program. Recognition of the importance of family-school partnerships has been emphasized in several national reports including *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Since the implementation of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, parents' rights have been specified and schools have been required to make sure that parents have informed consent before their child is evaluated, classified and programmed to receive special education services (P.L. 94-142 Regulations). Parent participation in conferences regarding student's eligibility for classification, programming and the development of the IEP is mandated by the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA, 1990). The recent Reauthorization of IDEA further stresses parental

involvement in students' education and requires additional parental participation, particularly, in decision making regarding the evaluation process (IDEA, 1997). In all states, parents will now be included in groups making eligibility and placement decisions about children with disabilities. Previously, in some states, parents only had a right to be included in IEP meetings. According to mandates legislated by the Reauthorization of IDEA, parents will have the right to consent to periodic re-evaluation of their children's program, in addition to initial evaluations. Additionally, the new law increases parental involvement by requiring regular progress reports, not required under previous laws. School reform efforts have also been promoting parent-school partnerships.

The National Education Goals for the year 2000 have identified increased parental involvement in learning as one of their foremost goals. The eighth goal of the National Education Goals for the year 2000 states that by the year 2000, "every school will promote partnerships that will increase personal involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children" (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). In 1994, Congress began requiring schools that received federal Title I money to develop a plan "that outlines how parents, the entire school staff and students will share the responsibility for improved student achievement, and the means by which the school and parents will build and develop a partnership to help children achieve the state's high standards" (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Many parent and professional organizations have begun to incorporate this governmental focus and are

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actively promoting parent-teacher partnerships in their policies and standards.

Professional Education Organizational Support

The National Council on Disability, an independent federal advisory agency, had conducted hearings in ten regions throughout the United States during the fall of 1994. The overwhelming testimony from families was that IDEA should be fine-tuned and its implementation improved regarding family involvement (National Council on Disability, 1995). The National Parent Teacher Association (1997) stresses family involvement as an organizational goal according to its recent set of national standards for parent/family involvement programs. Additionally, more than thirty other professional organizations, including the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the American Federation of Teachers, have agreed to emphasize increased parent-teacher communication and interaction in their policy standards (Harvard Newsletter, 1997).

Impact on Teacher Education Programs

In order to ensure that future teachers understand the importance of establishing and maintaining good home-school affiliation, it is imperative that pre-service teacher educational programs incorporate components of family involvement and the development of effective communication skills. At this time, a relatively small percent of university teacher education programs have incorporated instruction in how to build and enhance these partnerships or have developed an atmosphere for collaboration in courses (Harvard Newsletter, 1997; Hughes, Ruhl, & Gorman, 1987). A study by the Harvard

Family Research Project (1998) found, in a review of teacher-certification requirements for all fifty states and the District of Columbia, that only twenty-two states even mentioned family involvement in their teacher certification requirements. Of the sixty teacher education programs in the twenty-two states that did mention family involvement in their state teacher-certification programs, there was minimal evidence of substantial coursework. The study found that 88 percent of the courses that incorporated family involvement focused on parent-teacher conferences, 80 percent emphasized parents teaching their children at home, and less than 25 percent deal with communication or understanding parents and families with disabilities (Harvard Newsletter, 1997).

It was also noted that teacher education programs did not provide direct interaction or contact with parents or guardians in their training programs. Of the teacher education programs which incorporate a component of parent/family involvement in their courses, over 85 percent presented family-related issues through lecture, class discussion and required readings, and less than 25 percent required that students work or interact directly with parents/families (Harvard Newsletter, 1997). Teacher education programs fault state departments of education for not incorporating coursework in communicating with families or promoting parent-teacher partnerships. These university teacher education programs, insist that too much is now required of them considering the restriction on the maximum number of course units allowed. This reported overload of demands noted by teacher education programs is similar to the concern expressed by

many experienced classroom teachers who find their attempts to involve parents hindered by teaching demands (Cohen & Ooms, 1993). These concerns have made family involvement a low priority in both public schools and university teacher education programs, regardless of the potential benefits (Krasnow, 1990).

Many of the skills required to promote effective partnerships are not covered in teacher education programs and need to be developed. Teachers need to acquire skills in effective interpersonal communication, conflict negotiation, problem solving and consensus building. They need to understand the importance of treating parents as equal partners and maintaining positive communication with parents, especially when problems arise. Likewise, parent and family members need to be attentive, persistent and consistent. They need to work as advocates for their child, working closely with the teacher to maintain a united front. Problems tend to result when parents' and teachers' expectations of school performance differ. Both parties need to be cognizant of the other's perspective.

Parental Involvement

According to Turnbull and Turnbull (1996), there is a continuum of parental involvement in schools, ranging from high, medium to low participation, depending on the circumstances. The highly involved family tends to be knowledgeable, assertive and empowered and functions as a strong advocate focused on ensuring that its child is provided with a free, appropriate education. The middle range typically consist of

families who participate in the legal formalities mandated by IDEA, such as classification, IEP, and annual review conferences. These families are often less knowledgeable regarding their child's program and the outcomes their child is achieving and they tend to be satisfied with their child's program. The lower end of the continuum consists of those families who feel disenfranchised, intimidated, angry and devalued by the school system and often perceive that their child is receiving an inferior education, particularly those from culturally diverse background (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1994; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, 1992).

Parents typically have realistic ideas about their child's abilities and academic and social needs and they need to share this information with the teacher and related school staff. They should closely monitor the child's adjustment and progress and follow appropriate steps to take corrective actions when problems begin to surface.

Family involvement should be proactive, rather than reactive. In order to establish a healthy, productive, meaningful interaction and maintain good rapport and effective support from all parties, care should be taken in considering and being sensitive to many issues that are pertinent to the everyday life of students both at school and at home. Typically, parents and teachers have good intentions of working with each other to foster students' academic and emotional growth and development, but often subtle yet profound issues may surface that ultimately hamper good parent-teacher relationships. Both parties need to have a fundamental understanding of the other's personal and

professional situations, their strengths and limitations and have sensitivity to their plight. They need to know the rights and responsibilities they have when dealing with students who have disabilities. While working in the role of advocate for students, they need to understand the characteristics related to the disability; the appropriate academic, environmental and social modifications needed and work in unison to ensure that pupils are provided with these accommodations. Building a strong parent-teacher partnership requires work but yields productive and positive outcomes. All children, especially those with disabilities, need to have the full and unconditional support of the significant adults in their lives. Positive home-school relationships provide a major step in ensuring that students receive the structure, direction and cohesive environment that they require.

Effects of Poor Communication

Too frequently there is a strain between school and home, teacher vs. parent, student vs. teacher, parent and student vs. teacher and administration. Although all parties involved seem to have good intentions and have the welfare of the student as their first priority, frequently communication breaks down and defenses build up. Often misperceptions prevail, faulty assumptions are made, misinterpretations surface and miscommunication results. Seemingly helpful, constructive suggestions may be misconstrued and become translated into personalized attacks which reach to the very core of the individual's identify (being a caring parent or a dedicated teacher). Although the student's welfare is the goal, when communication is ineffective or faulty, the student

inevitably suffers.

The number of due process hearings resulting from a failure to resolve classification, placement and program issues could be reduced by ensuring better communication and fostering more positive partnerships in schools. Students who are already burdened with disabilities need to have the full and unanimous support of the significant adults in their lives. The two most influential forces in children's lives, parents and teachers, need to be united and collaborative in their efforts to assist the child in developing to the fullest. When either party is at odds, doubt and resentment cast negative feelings. Even subtle resentment or disagreement on the part of either party can sabotage an otherwise sound and productive program.

Understanding the Other Side

As human beings we tend to see our point of view but it is important that we do not become myopic. The teacher may be struggling in the classroom with a child who is experiencing serious adjustment problems. The parents do not seem to be taking an active role in the problem. It is easy for the teacher to become frustrated by what seems to be parental apathy, or perhaps, resistance, or defiance and to become cynical about the likelihood for change. Parents who do not respond readily to phone calls or written correspondence can easily be stereo-typed as parents who don't care, who don't concern themselves with their child's education, who don't view school issues as a priority. In fact, most parents are concerned about the welfare of their child in class but a variety of

facts impede their ability to communicate with school staff. Many disabilities tend to be familial and the parent may be very uncomfortable and avoid contact with school as they recall a childhood of embarrassment and frustration as a result of their disability (Katz, 1994). These same parents may have had very negative experiences with administrators or teachers or have other children who have had problems and their patience and coping skills have been exhausted. They may be weary from what they view as constant battles to gain or maintain ground in the war they wage as they fight for the rights of their child who has a specific disability. Their frustration may be characterized as resistance or defiance as they struggle to advocate for their child and attempt to negotiate though regular and/or special education bureaucracies in order to gain access to appropriate programs, accommodations and support services. They may feel alienated by the system and become defensive or withdrawn as their attempts may have seemed fruitless. Parents who do not seem to place their child's education as their first priority may be doing so out of necessity. Often, personal or family circumstances may be so stressful or demanding that, in the big picture, the parents realistically do not view school issues as a priority as they are not life threatening or as critical as problems they try to cope with on a daily basis. Issues, such as the serious illness of a family member, the death of a loved one, the stress of living with someone who abuses illegal substances, trying to overcome serious financial difficulties, coping with several children as a single, working parent, or the sheer mental and physical exhaustion that many parents deal with on a daily basis hamper

their ability to be as involved as they may need to be. Sometimes, parents of children with disabilities have difficulty accepting and dealing with the diagnosis and the prognosis that their loved one will not live a 'normal' life (Mary, 1990). They may have difficulty coping with the fact that their dreams of success and happiness for their child may never come to fruition. They may be struggling to face the reality that their expectation for a good school experience, for a joyous graduation and a productive career will not transpire and find it too difficult to grasp this painful loss. They may be experiencing feelings of isolation, blame and/or guilt, therefore, denial may be their natural defense mechanism. It is difficult for any parent to hear that their child is not doing well, especially when the prospects for amelioration may be limited by the degree and extent of the disabling condition. Often parents are interested and concerned and want to actively participate in their child's educational program but everyday factors, such as, job constraints, time factors, child care and transportation issues can hamper their ability to return phone calls or attend school conferences, IEP meetings, etc.. Parents may feel embarrassed by their limited education or experience and intimidated by the educational system. Teachers need to consider these possibilities, realize that most parents want the best for their child but that the stresses of daily living and the added burden of dealing with a child with a disability can be overwhelming for many.

Likewise, teachers' intentions and motivations may be misunderstood or misinterpreted by parents. Parents need to be sure that the teacher understands the child's

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disability and the effect it has on their academic, social, emotional and adaptive functioning. Parents know their youngsters well, recognize strengths and weaknesses, understand how disability impacts on their children and families and want their children to get the attention and care that they need in the classroom. Teachers may feel overwhelmed and feel unable to stretch themselves any further as they attempt to teach to the class norms while making accommodations and curricular and strategic modifications to effectively deal with the increasingly broad range of academic, emotional/social, behavioral and adaptive abilities demonstrated by students in their classes. While they may have the intention of effectively meeting the needs of every student, they may lack sufficient support, such as adequate staff assistance, time to plan and prepare; training in how to make appropriate modifications in the child's program or they may not have an adequate understanding of the type of disability and most effective strategies to use. Teachers benefit when parents clearly explain their child's specific learning needs, keep the teacher informed of any changes at home and support and supplement the teacher's classroom efforts.

Importance of Building Rapport:

Communication should be initiated on a positive note. As we know from educational psychology, individuals respond to positive reinforcement. Trust and respect should be established early in the school year. An effective way to initiate communication and establish rapport is for teachers to contact parents shortly after the beginning of the

school year. Rapport is based on the increased knowledge and understanding between teachers and parents. It should be initiated early and developed over time. This initial, positive interaction establishes positive relationships and a strong foundation of trust which is beneficial when more critical issues arise throughout the year. Teachers need to actively engage parents in discussions in order to identify and build on family strengths and resources. When interpersonal communications are encouraged, teachers begin to treat parents as equal partners. Teachers may need to be reminded of the importance of positive communication with parents, especially when the child is having problems (Harvard Newsletter, 1997). The attitude that parents should be controlled is no longer promoted, but rather that parental views and needs should be considered. Parents need to be welcomed as colleagues. Parental input can be invaluable as they typically have realistic ideas about their child's abilities and academic and social needs.

The education of the child needs to be seen as a joint venture and a collegial relationship needs to be fostered between parents and teachers. Typically, parents and teachers share common goals, to help the child learn effectively and relate well socially to their peers (Berger, 1991). Parents feel valued when teachers work in partnerships with them. They gain confidence in their ability to contribute to their children's schooling and as a result, are more likely to become involved in their education. Problems tend to result when parents' and teachers' exceptations of school performance differ. Students' academic and social behavior may reflect the value the family places on academic performance and

behavior, the amount of time children have to devote to schoolwork and the level of parental involvement (Ramey & Ramey, 1994). This is important information for the teacher to know and understand.

Initial Parent-Teacher Contact

During the initial conversation, the teacher's focus should be to make an introduction; explain the class' goals and objectives; invite parents to share any relevant information that would help the teacher to understand the child; encourage parents to contact the school if any concerns develop and; perhaps most importantly, to comment on the child's positive attributes. Positive reinforcement is important in ensuring that the parent understands that the teacher sees the child's strong points and welcomes the child into the class. It helps to establish a good rapport and opens the door to ongoing communication. Teachers need to focus on capabilities and strengths rather than deficits and weaknesses (Davern, 1996).

The parent needs to keep an open view, share relevant data that would directly or indirectly impact on the child's adjustment and progress in class and commit to monitoring the child's homework assignments and factors which would affect their academic growth.

Preparing for the Conference

Successful parent conferences can lead to positive communication between school and home (Kroth & Edge, 1997). A critical factor that determines the success of

conferences is the educator's preparation for the conference (Jordan et al, 1998). In order to have a successful meeting, the planning needs to be well thought out and carefully implemented. The parent should be given the consideration of advanced notice for an informal teacher conference but mandatory notice is required for more formal meetings, such as classification or IEP conferences. A concerted effort should be made to contact the parent by phone to find a mutually convenient time and then, if time allows, a follow-up letter should be send as a reminder.

Invite both parents and other significant family members or support persons to the conference. Some families have an extended family network whose members may play an important role in the child's development (Hurtado, 1995). These individuals may function as a support to the parents, play a role in effective implementation and follow through and be helpful in hearing and retaining key points when parents are overwhelming by the amount and intensity of the information presented at conferences (Hurtado, 1995).

When scheduling the meeting, it is important to allow sufficient time so that problem areas are not left unresolved and there is enough time to completely address critical issues. The quantity and quality of time devoted to the conference shows the parent how important the issue is to the teacher (Jordan et al., 1998).

The location of the meeting is another important consideration. The room should be psychologically and physically comfortable. Chairs should be adult-sized and set up in

groupings so that all parties can sit comfortably and at eye level with each other with no physical barriers between them. The meeting area needs to be private and free from distractions. The information discussed may be very personal and highly sensitive. Conferences should not be held in places such as the faculty lounge where staff may be entering to use the phone, get a soda, etc. or the classroom after school where a student may enter to get a forgotten book or come in to ask for help. These interruptions can be not only intrusive but disruptive to thought processes and embarrassing to the parties involved but can constitute an invasion of privacy. Although parent conferences may be a common experience for the teacher, it can be quite threatening and intimidating for parents and students.

Holding the Conference

It is critical for effective and ongoing communication that rapport be established to diminish the psychological distance between parents and professionals. It can be rather intimidating for parents to come into the school to meet with "professionals". The tone and atmosphere of the meeting must be comfortable for all parties. The meeting room should be set up in such a way as to put both parents and teachers at ease. The structure and dynamics should be informal, comfortable and relaxed. In order to promote good interaction and encourage open communication, the teacher should not be perceived as the authority figure. When the conference is between one teacher and the parents, the seating should be configured so that all parties are equal, with the teacher and parents

seated around the table not between a desk. In situations where a group of teachers are involved, an effort should be made so that the seating is not perceived as "them against us" or "authority vs. victim" but rather an intermingling of teachers who are postured in a relaxed and supportive manner. Rapport can be established with small talk and light refreshments are helpful to break the ice (Perl, 1995).

Professionals need to be aware of the technical jargon and numerous acronyms that may be everyday lingo among school personnel but can be meaningless and intimidating to parents. Terminology needs to be clear and relevant and as free of educational terms as possible. When specific codes or terms need to be used, these words or phrases should be clearly defined and clarified. Descriptions of students' skill levels, their behavior, and classroom adjustment needs to be stated explicitly with examples presented. The number of times or for how long the specific behavior has occurred should be clearly discussed (Jordan et al., 1998).

Agenda of the Conference

The agenda of the meeting should be structured yet flexible. Both parents and teachers benefit from listing key points to present, questions that need to be answered, and critical items that need to be addressed. If many issues are of concern, the list of topics should be prioritized to ensure that the most critical points are discussed if time constraints are an issue. Focus on one issue at a time, not all frustrations at once. Perhaps it may be necessary to identify a specific target behavior. While it is critical to have a

plan to outline crucial issues to be discussed, there should be enough flexibility to incorporate concerns that are important to either party.

Make sure that goals set are realistic. Short and long term goals should be clearly discussed and mutually decided upon. Both the teacher and the parents need to be encouraged to acknowledge their concerns if they are not in agreement with the proposed goals and objectives. In setting expectations, both parties must be aware that they may need to adjust to disappointments and try again. Sharing of ideas, concerns and suggestions must be encouraged and openly accepted.

The intervention plan must be realistic and manageable by both the teacher, parent and student, with some flexibility and adjustment built into the plan. The remedial interventions must be considered and prioritized. Expectations and subsequent timelines must be clearly established. The roles and responsibilities of the individuals involved must be realistic, specific and agreed upon, including monitoring responsibilities. Evaluation criteria must be established and an effective means of communicating progress needs to be set-up. As the session concludes, a summary or overview of the discussion, decision on goals and evaluative measures, and a confirmation of timelines and individual responsibilities should be reviewed (Kroth et al., 1997). A written follow-up is an additional reinforcement as parents frequently become overwhelmed as the issues discussed often are emotionally-draining and psychologically stressful.

Critical Communication Skills

Often the tone and semantics of teacher-parent communication is critical. A study by Lindle (1989) demonstrates how misunderstood cues can result in a building of mental and/or emotional barriers between parents and professionals. The survey revealed that school personnel strongly believe that when teachers communicate with families in a professional, business-like manner they will gain the respect and support of the parents. Whereas, parents view "professionalism" on the part of teachers and other school staff as undesirable. Parents have characterized "professionalism" as being "too business-like", "patronizing," or "being talked down to". They report relating better to a "personal touch" (Lindle, 1989).

Communication needs to be pleasant yet open and to-the-point. While diplomacy and sensitivity to feelings is of concern, when critical issues are presented in a clear, nonambiguous manner, misunderstandings are minimized and issue resolution is more likely. The language used during parent-teacher discussions should be kept simple and direct. Educational and/or psychological jargon should be avoided.

==In order== to ensure that they are actually saying what needs to be said and hear not only what is said but to understand what has been implied thorough non-verbal or indirect means, teachers and parents need to develop effective interpersonal communication skills. They may need workshops or inservice training in order to become proficient in critical communication skills, such as, conflict negotiation, problem solving

and consensus building. Both teachers and parents need to develop good interpersonal skills so that they become attentive, persistent and dependable over time in their relationships with each other, thereby showing their genuine interest, care and concern (Covey, 1990).

In order to facilitate interaction, teachers need to ask open questions and encourage parents to discuss any problems they or their children are experiencing, to feel free to ask questions and to make suggestions. Parents need to feel empowered, to feel comfortable enough to share their concerns and personal problems that directly or indirectly effect the child. When appropriate, parents should be given the opportunity to "blow off steam", to vent their feelings, to express their anger and frustration. Likewise, teachers need to share their concerns, to be open and forthright. It is important that teachers be sensitive to the manner in which they present the problems or concerns they have about the student. While teachers may become frustrated and discouraged by the student's inappropriate behavior, lack of progress, etc. it is important to keep in mind that parents are emotionally invested in the child and take constructive criticism or negative feedback very personally. Teachers must also maintain a balance between showing a genuine interest and maintaining a professional distance and not to become overinvolved in the personal life of the student and their family. Mastering specific communication strategies, such as good listening and clarifying skills is an important factor in establishing and maintaining good parent-teacher relationships.

Active listening is an effective method of promoting communication and fostering a productive partnership. It requires effort and skill but is useful in facilitating interaction. As parents and teachers discuss mutual concerns they need not only to be clear in articulating exactly the issues which they find to be of concern but they need to be good listeners, to hear what the other party is saying. They need to listen in an open, nonjudgmental manner.

Reflection is a technique that can be used to convey understanding between teachers and parents. The listener can try to put into words the affective or non-verbal cues that are behind the speaker's words, such as facial tension, hand wringing, etc.. Teachers frequently find reflection to be beneficial in conveying their empathy and concern when discussing a parent's concern about their child. It can be useful in helping the parent sort out and understand their personal feelings. Reflection demonstrates recognition and understanding of the issue by acknowledging the parents' feelings (Perl, 1995).

Clarification is another useful technique used to clarify speakers' meaning when their statements lack cohesion or a clear focus. Teachers find that restating the content of what parents say helps to eliminate the ambiguity and helps to ensure mutual understanding (Perl, 1995).

Summarization is a recapitulation of what the family member has said. It is a method of organized review. Summarizing the content of what was stated and agreed to

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by both parties is beneficial in that it reviews the concerns, suggestions, goals and plans in a clear and orderly manner. It can also be useful as a means to recall the highlights of previous meetings, tying together confusing, lengthy, or rambling topics and acknowledging the point at which the topic has become exhausted (Walker & Singer, 1993).

Awareness of Rights and Privileges

A crucial aspect of the communication process is ensuring that all parties involved are aware of the effect that educational legislation has on their obligations, rights and privileges. In the past, families were on the edge of professional decision making on critical issues related to referral, classification and placement (Mehan, 1993; Ware, 1994). Educational legislation now mandates parental participation in the classification, placement and programming of their children. Commonly enforced laws include the Individuals with Education Act (IDEA) and the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) which provide that students have a free and appropriate education and are provided with appropriate modifications and accommodations which allow the student to function as successfully as possible in the school setting. Collaboration between educators and parents is critical to ensure that the child with special needs receives the most appropriate and effective program. Parent involvement must include participation in the planning as well as the implementation of the child's special education programming and/or related services. When all parties are working in unison, are committed to the plan, and have the

same goals and expectations, the greater the likelihood of academic success and satisfactory emotional and social adjustment for the student.

Cultural issues

Teachers and parents need to be cognizant of the influences that cultural differences play in interpersonal communication and interaction. Increasing numbers of students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have been represented in public school systems in recent years. During this same period of time, the numbers of these students who have been placed in special education classes has increased in disproportionate numbers (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Garcia, Wilkinson, Ortiz, 1995; Harry, 1995). Researchers have identified several reasons for this phenomenon, (1) issues related to the labeling process (Artiles et al, 1994), (2) cultural and linguistic differences of students and their families (Harry, 1995), and (3) inappropriate assessment and placement due to language differences (Garcia & Ortiz, 1988). Teachers and school personnel need to understand that cultural differences directly affect parents' perceptions and understanding of the classification and placement process. It needs to be understood that families from diverse backgrounds generally have a broader definition of disability (Harry, 1995). Other cultural and ethnic groups tend to be more accepting of psychological and biological differences or may view differences differently (Harry, 1992). Whereas, our current classification categorical definitions are based on mainstreamed expectations for development and learning (Harry, 1995). Families may

not understand the process, terms or commitment involved in the classification process. Parent may even confuse special education services with English-as-a-second -language (ESL) services (Linan-Thompson. & Jean, 1997).

Changing demographics have widened the gap between teachers' and families' economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. These gaps may strain or limit communication between teachers and parents. Studies indicate that minority parents tend to be less involved and less informed than parents in the mainstream (Harry, 1992). Reasons for this may be that economically disadvantaged and minority parents, in particular, face language and literacy barriers, may have no access to transportation to and from schools, frequently have no experience in asking teachers or other school staff questions and fear attending school events at night if they live in dangerous neighborhoods.

Teachers need to increase their knowledge and understanding of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families. Although these students may seem to have adapted adequately and that cultural differences are not negatively impacting on their school performance, these differences may be a significant factor in pupils' social adaptation and emotional adjustment to school. Cultural traditions and expectations often have a direct effect on students' home lives, their interaction with peers and their dealings with the authority figures they come into contact with. Cultural norms and traditions may influence the way students responds in stressful situations. An example of this is the

student who will not directly look the teacher in the eye even when told to. The teacher may view this as defiance or stubbornness from the child but the teacher needs to consider cultural norms. As a sign of respect to elders, the child's cultural upbringing may dictate that minors look down when spoken to, especially when being reprimanded. It is important for school staff to realize that families are influenced by generational status, gender, social class, education, occupational group and other variables (Harry, 1995). By building an awareness of cultural diversity, teachers strengthen their ability to teach and connect successfully with pupils and their families. Teachers can benefit when they examine the "cultural base of their own belief system" in relation to children and adults (Harry, 1992). This will enable them to become more aware of the cultural lens through which they make judgments about children and families (Harry, 1995). Just as teachers learn how to design classrooms and implement curriculum to reflect and value diversity, they need to acquire skills to effectively interact and communicate with parents of diverse cultures (Jordan, Peel, & Peel, 1993).

Student Involvement

Pupils should be as actively involved in their program planning as possible. Including children and adolescents in the decision making process enables them to make decisions about themselves. It provides them with accurate estimates of their abilities and contributes to the building of their self esteem (Sattler, 1988). Students can be involved in conferences at many different levels (Teglasi, 1985). Although students'

maturity level and emotional status needs to be considered, in the degree to which they participate, when students are actively involved in the process, the outcome can be much more productive and rewarding. Students should be encouraged to participate in the planning of their program, to ask questions, to contribute to their own goals and objectives and to share their concerns and feelings about their future. Students need to feel empowered and they need to be actively involved in their education as they have the greatest personal investment in ensuring that the proposed plan works. When they are included and begin to have an active hand in planning and controlling their fate, pupils are more likely to commit to the plan which results in a more successful outcome. Early involvement in the classification and IEP process is beneficial and can be crucial for students' investment and full commitment to their educational programs. It helps students understand how the process works; it enables them to become more aware and insightful regarding their learning style and academic strengths and weaknesses; it promotes their understanding as to what types of accommodations and/or modifications they require; it increases their self-confidence and promotes the development of self-advocacy skills. Students must develop the ability to advocate for themselves if they should need continued modifications in post-secondary situations, whether in vocational or technical course work, in college degree programs or in work settings. It is important to keep in mind that students may need instruction in order to understand the IEP process, guidance in how to appropriately contribute to their IEP development and reassurance

regarding the importance of their input in the process.

School Policy and Administrative Support

According to a study by Joyce Epstein, director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University (1996), most parents never participate directly in activities at their children's schools. Despite all the recent rhetoric and studies which support parent involvement, schools tend to keep parent roles to a minimum (Lynn, 1997). Family involvement is more likely to occur when school policies encourage communication with parents and school administrators support and reward teachers for their efforts. Attempts at involving parents in their child's school are most successful when teachers and school staff assume that all parents want to do the best for their children and that they can make important contributions to their children's education. Both school administrators and staff need to understand the benefits of and the barriers to family involvement.

Information Resources

Families should be provided with data about available services. Teachers need to act as a resource to parents by providing information regarding community and agency resources and materials (Sussell et al., 1996). Parents benefit from having access to information regarding human services, advocacy and self help agencies and lists of national and state organizations of interest to families with special needs (Sontag & Schacht, 1994). Additional materials that should be available for distribution include

information regarding different disabilities and articles of special interest to parents. Schools should develop parent education programs, have a lending library available to families of students with special needs and handbooks which provide relevant information regarding support team members, services and general guidelines as a reference. Inservice education programs should be provided for teachers, support staff and community members which provide opportunities to explain various disabilities and the special needs of students with disabilities and their families. Social support services have been found to have a positive impact on parents, families and children.

Practical Implications

There are many reasons to promote school partnerships. The many benefits include improvements in school programs and school climate; increases in parents' knowledge and leadership skills; ongoing family services and support; the building of connections between families with others in the school and in the community and the support of teachers in their work. The primary benefit, though, is the impact that partnerships have on students (Epstein, 1995). When parents and teachers unite to form a supportive bond, all students, especially those with special needs grow and prosper academically, socially and emotionally. According to the United States Department of Education (1996), it is imperative that parents be involved in the learning process. Thirty years of research tells us that the starting point of putting children on the road to excellence is parental involvement in their children's education.

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